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SUBJECT: El Salvador: Growing Concern Over Violent Crime

11. Summary: Recent comments by the Archbishop of San Salvador and former National Civilian Police (PNC) Director Rodrigo Avila point to growing public concern over El Salvador's spiraling violent crime rates, and the mounting pressure on President Mauricio Funes to reassure an anxious public that his administration has the situation under control. 2009 ended with a total of approximately 4300 murders, an average of twelve per day. End summary.

12. On January 10, San Salvador Archbishop Jose Luis Escobar Alas used his high-profile Sunday homily to voice his dissatisfaction with government public security plans that have "failed to stem the violence" impacting the country. The Monsignor noted that with the nation suffering on average twelve homicides a day, the current public security measures "are not working." He went on to urge implementation of a gun control law that would prohibit citizens from possessing firearms. (Comment: Pronouncements by the Archbishop of San Salvador normally carry considerable moral weight in this largely Catholic country. End comment).

13. Also over the weekend, former two-time National Civilian Police Director and 2009 ARENA Presidential candidate Rodrigo Avila called for the Funes' administration to redouble efforts to control street gang violence. In an interview with conservative daily El Diario De Hoy Avila opined that "failure to take back control" of the streets and the prison system from the street gangs could result in the Funes government "completely losing control" over public security in the near future. Avila, who stated that his comments were meant as "constructive and helpful" (rather than political), called for conceptualization of a comprehensive national gang strategy, to include enhanced operational law enforcement efforts and passage of an organized crime law similar to the U.S. RICO statute.

14. Comment: The comments by the Monsignor and former PNC Director Avila reflect a growing concern over violent crime that is shared across the entire ideological spectrum of this highly-polarized country. With the nation facing on average twelve homicides a day, and the press serving up a daily dose of carnage, the public is growing increasingly anxious for signs that the Funes administration is capable of bringing the violence under control. Recent developments, such as the Supreme Court voting to extradite a wanted Salvadoran national to the U.S., and pending Legislative Assembly passage of an electronic surveillance bill, bode well for bilateral cooperation on law enforcement. In the meantime, the Funes administration will continue to face difficult questions, mounting public uncertainty, and loss of investor confidence if violent crime rates stay high. End comment.

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